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AUTHOR Grant, Grace E.
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ABSTRACT

This paper proposes an alternative means by which to produce improvement in the quality of professional convention programs. This method is one in which concern for professional relatedness supersedes a concern for individual competition. Dialogue as the first essential element in relatedness would encourage varied perspectives on research methodologies and interpretation of data. Discussion among presenters as well as audience perceptions would also be considered of importance. All aspects of the program process would be viewed as contributing to the professional development of the participants. Sessions would focus on fewer papers in order to allow deeper study. Wholeness, rather than fragmentation, of the group would be emphasized. This proposed approach would indicate a concern for individuals and human relatedness. (DWH)

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FUTURE PROFESSIONAL PROGRAMS: A CLASHING SEPARATENESS OR A HUMAN CONTEXT?*

Grace E. Grant
Occidental College

The ideas expressed in this paper have evolved from reflection on my work as a member of the American Educational Research Association Division J Program Advisory Committee for three years and as its Chair in the past two years. They also arise from my work as a researcher on teaching and from an ongoing conviction that methodology, and its underlying assumptions, must be appropriate to the phenomena under study. My purpose is to discuss one issue, related to professional conferences, which has been repeatedly raised in the past, and to suggest that our efforts in addressing this issue require a fundamental shift in our orientation as participants. As the organizing concept for this discussion, I have used the metaphor of "clashing separateness."

Although a research conference and a Broadway opening customarily have little in common, both do require preparation for roles and performance. I began thinking about this analogy, recently, after reading a interview with Glenda Jackson, preceding

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the opening of her O'Neill performance last month. In describing the way she prepares for a role, she commented:

> "I just read the play and wait to find out about it at rehearsal,... It's no good me going in with an already finalized view of my character.... We're doing the play, not a character, and everyone who's in it is responsible for the play. The characters exist in relation to all those others, and it would be nonsense to come to rehearsal with a character ready. You'd just have a lot of clashing separateness." (Gold, 1985, p. 20)

Jackson's notion of "clashing separateness" struck a familiar note as I reflected on three years of discussion about AERA Division J's annual program. Those discussions have been characterized by a pervasive concern about the poor quality of presentation. (Let me add, parenthetically, that since our task was to suggest improvements, the committee tended to focus on program areas we perceived as weak and in need of change. Although not mentioned in detail here, we also commended areas of strength and commented on substative issues. Our comments arose from audience data gathered from 37% to 40% of the Division's sessions.)

In each of the last three years, members of the Program Advisory Committee have identified a need to improve delivery, to develop coherence within sessions, to focus on conceptual and theoretical rather than methodological issues, and to prevent absence. Their suggested solutions to improve these presentation issues have ranged from more clearly articulated expectations to mandated consequences for irresponsibility. These discussions

indicate that the relationship between what the program has been in the past and what we would have liked it to be was far from perfect. As evaluators of program sessions, we have recommended a variety of new procedures to assure compliance on these quality issues. Not surprisingly, each of these proposals requires implementing a set of received ideas.

What was astonishing, however, is the anger with which solutions to improve these qualities were suggested. What lies behind this fiery passion, I would argue, is the larger concern that our relatedness, our connection as individuals, has been violated. We are offended by this "clashing separateness" of individual participants because a concern for human good has not been treated equally with a concern for ideas and things.

This realization has convinced me that we have been asking the wrong question to produce improvement in that quality. Instead of asking for procedures to assure compliance, I believe the program would be better served by asking how to assure our connections as people. If our overriding concern is providing for this human context at professonal meetings, the solution we seek is not another set of procedures but a mode of being and an environment in which concern for our relatedness is supported in a much more direct way than at present. The alternative I propose is one in which a concern for relatedness supersedes a concern for individual competition; it is one which values becoming over being. Such an environment would, I propose, support diversity

through dialogue, through professional development, and through holism.

Dialogue is the first essential element in relatedness. This discussion would foster and encourage varied perspectives on research methodologies, on interpretation of data, and on paradigms for understanding postsecondary education. Our perspective on modes of postsecondary research would be as broad as possible, involving new and emerging views as well as more established ones -- for example, the naturalistic, ethnographic, phenomenological, marxist, and feminist as well as empirical methods. This diversity would be supported through invited addressess, as it is at present, as well as through paper critique sessions and symposia. Dialogue would also be developed within program sessions themselves. Sessions would regularly involve discussion among presenters, who had read copies of each presentation prior to the meeting. Critics and chairs would make comparisons and cross references among the presentations. In addition, the perceptions of the audience would be viewed as crucial to this discussion and would be incorporated in meaningful ways. All of this dialogue would be viewed as important to the presentation of papers.

Secondly, a concern for our relatedness would cause us to view all aspects of the program process as contributing to the professional development of participants. In reviewing papers for possible acceptance to the program, readers would shape their

comments, both for acceptances and rejections, toward specific improvements in the research or its reporting; like editors at The New Yorker, readers would view their task as helping authors to say what they wanted to say. In the presentations, critics would speak directly to the issues raised, again with the purpose of improving the research. At the annual meetings, experienced colleagues would mentor younger faculty and graduate students, introducing them to colleagues with similar research interests and sponsoring them through the proposal process.

Finally, this concern for our relatedness would work toward wholeness rather than fragmentation. In the program, this could mean that sessions would focus on fewer papers to allow deeper study. (This would not necessarily mean fewer program participants as the number of sessions per day could be expanded.) Session critics and chairs would work toward connecting the parts of each session, ordering and revealing relationships among the research where they are not obvious. Chairs would facilitate sharing papers before the meeting; in sessions of loosely connected papers, they would provide a context for understanding the grouping. They would bring audience and participants together in meaningful dialogue.

A concern about relatedness -- about dialogue, about development, and about wholeness -- is not a romantic or unprincipled notion. Instead, it requires courage in building and maintaining meaningful relationships. It requires viewing others

as individuals rather than members of a group. criticizing at some times and not at others, and developing the sensitivity to know when each is appropriate. It requires a direct confrontation of major issues and controversies. It requires a mode of being that promotes growth in others.

This concern with relatedness, with the meanings that are gained from context as well as from principles, has more frequently been associated with a feminine world view. Nel Noddings labels this concern "caring" in moral education; Carol Gilligan calls it a "contextual" sense of self; Shulamit Reinharz refers to an "experiential" analysis of data. Whatever its label, this perspective is, I believe, a part of all of us, a complement to the dominant concern for principles. Each of us, at some moments, acts out of a concern for the other. Furthermore, our individual growth is dependent upon precisely this kind of meaningful professional relations.

A concern about our relatedness provides a needed complement to our concern about principles and about ideas. As a part of a research conference, we of Division J will never dismiss the importance of ideas or the need for analysis and criticism. But we can quiet the "clashing separateness." By the addition of this feminine approach, our proceedings would have the courage to show a concern for individuals and our human relatedness.

Reference

Gold, Sylvane. (1985, February 15). Glenda gears up for O'Neill marathon. The Wall Street Journal, p. 20.